

Editorial

A DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY- SAARC Region

Tobacco use is a significant hurdle to development gains worldwide. It is the leading cause of preventable death. Smoking-related illness costs billions of dollars each year, imposing a heavy economic toll on countries, both in terms of direct medical care for adults and lost productivity.

The tobacco epidemic is one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced, killing around 6 million people a year. More than 5 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while more than 600 000 are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke. Nearly 80% of the more than 1 billion smokers worldwide live in low- and middle-income countries, where the burden of tobacco-related illness and death is heaviest. Tobacco users who die prematurely deprive their families of income, raise the cost of health care and hinder economic development.

The use of tobacco by adolescents remains a major public health concern worldwide. There are 1 billion smokers globally, of which more than 50% are young people. South Asia Region contributing large amount of the global burden of tobacco users. India alone has about 35 million tobacco users. There are variations in trends of tobacco use among the SAARC countries, which largely reflects cultural differences, values, and norms toward use of tobacco and tobacco related products in these societies.

Evidence of the harmful effects of tobacco has existed for centuries, at first in relation to oral cancer and then to vascular diseases and lung cancer or Non Communicable Disease (NCD). However, even though smoking is often initiated early in life, its most obvious health consequences are not seen until later stages in life, when they manifest as various chronic problems in adulthood through old age. Because of late onset of symptoms, most smokers are oblivious of the harmful effects of cigarette smoking. One of the obvious implications of tobacco use is addiction or dependence, which is a state of drug-seeking behavior. It is well established that multiple nicotinic receptors reside in the central nervous system that are stimulated on nicotine intake; hence cigarette smokers have higher levels of brain nicotine receptors than do nonsmokers. Another implication of serious consequences of tobacco use is the link between smoking and cancer.

Another implication is the influence of cigarette smoking on other respiratory illnesses. Smoking cigarettes is a known risk factor for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, interstitial lung diseases, respiratory tract infections, and pulmonary tuberculosis. Smoking substantially increases the risk of TB and death from TB. More than 20% of global TB incidence may be attributable to smoking according to WHO report. Smoking is the most important risk factor for COPD in Asia, which therefore makes smoking indirectly responsible for the increased disability life adjusted years (DALY) and the mortality due to COPD in the region. Current statistics shows smoking-related diseases kill 1 in 10 adults, and if the current trend continues, smoking-related diseases will kill 1 in 6 adults by the year 2030 globally.

Tobacco smoking remains a source of public health concern in Asia despite some success in achieving a gradual decline in prevalence rates among countries in the region. More vigorous target-oriented goals are needed to address rising trends of smoking among girls and young smokers in general. Global governance is a prerequisite on the regional countries to uphold the World Health Organization framework convention on tobacco control, is required to strengthen the regional effort in containing this serious public health problem

The public health community must recognize that tobacco use is a global problem that needs international collaboration as well as regional consolidation. Policy Maker, Researcher public health program managers in the region need to consolidate actions toward active, evidence-based interventions needed to effectively control the lethal public health problem of tobacco and make tobacco free SAARC Region